Interview with former Air Force Flight Nurse and Korean War veteran Lillian Keil. Conducted by Mr. Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Navy Medicine, 2 January 2001.

I understand that you had 175 flights in Korea?
175 flights out of Japan into Korea.

How many flights did you have in World War II?
In Europe I had 250.

Into Normandy?
From Normandy and into the Battle of Bulge, northern France, and the Rhineland. I got four air medals for that theater of operation.

And how many Battle Stars?
Four for Europe. Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, Northern France and the Rhineland. There were four for that area. I was just honored at the Rose Bowl, November 4th--the UCLA-Stanford game, and then this program, the next to the last page, the whole page is devoted to Middle Eastern Service Medals with Four Battle Stars, and Korea with seven Battle Stars.

North Africa you say?
It's ETO. European Theater of Operations. And then I have 25 Trans-Atlantic crossings, one was by boat when I went over there aboard the SS *Cristobel.* The other ones were from Prestwick, Scotland flying across the Atlantic and sometimes into Labrador, Newfoundland, New York, or to Iceland, the Azores into Bermuda or into Florida.

What rank were you when you went to Korea?
I was a second lieutenant in Europe and was a first lieutenant and then a captain in Korea.

When did you go to Korea?
In June of 1950.

So you were there when the war broke out.
My chief nurse, Louise Bainbridge, was in Korea and a Maj. Lucile Slattery came in after she did. It seems to me that Louise Bainbridge might have been the last person to go out of the Chosin Reservoir.

You got there in. . .
June 1950. I was a stewardess for United Airlines and I told them I was leaving for the School of Air Evacuation. And they tried to talk me out of it because they were going to have a Trans-Pacific flight from Hawaii to San Francisco. They told me to hold off because they would give me the chief stewardess position in San Francisco if I stayed. As it was, I told them I was going into the School of Air Evacuation. I went to Europe and came back. I was the first stewardess to fly out of Hawaii to San Francisco with Governor Brown and all of the dignitaries--the newspaper people. Then, I was in a military uniform flying on my old United Airlines flight with my airline crew all the way into Tokyo as an Air Force flight nurse. That was kind of interesting.

When you got to Korea were you actually headquartered there?
No. In Japan.

Where?
We were stationed at the headquarters of the 315th Air Division. That was Ashiya and GEN William Turner was the commander of the 315th Air Division, a combat cargo command. He also was chief of the Berlin Airlift. We were there for 2 weeks, six of us flight nurses and they didn't know we were on the station. But when they found out that we were there (*laughter*) we got invited to dinner with the commander and his staff. After that they assigned the six flight nurses to different stations in Japan.

You were actually in Japan then?
We were always in Japan. We never were stationed in Korea. We were flying from Japan to Korea.

Were you involved in the Inchon landing which would have been the 15th of September?
We were flying into Pusan. When we went in to K-14 (Kimpo) in September--the 26th. . . K-14, which was Seoul-Kimpo, was not secured at the time and they held us off for a little while. Then we flew in there even before they had secured the perimeter of Kimpo. We called it K-14. And then, of course, we went flying down into Taegu, Pusan, and back up.

Were you carrying casualties at that time?
Yes. Transferring patients from one station to another depending upon their wounds as to where they would be sent. Head cases would go one place and burn cases would go another place, amputees another place, head injuries, etc. When we started in at Kimpo then that was the beginning of the rat race. We didn't have an operations office. This was at Taegu during the early time. They had a C-47 which was a command headquarters, the operations office. We got some of our patients at that stage with our corpsmen delivering our patients by foot--two stretcher bearers carrying a patient to our airplane from different areas on the field. At that point there were also POWs that had escaped from the prison train.

These were Koreans or Americans?
They were Americans.

Americans?
Yes. They were on the train and escaped from the train. They were on a march before that and if they couldn't keep up they were shot. So they arrived at the airfield and I took them to the operations officer. I still have some pictures of that particular group of POWs.
These men had been captured early on in the war?
Yes. And then there were five L-5s that came onto that airfield. The L-5s each had a patient on board because there was only room for one. The way the airfield was sectioned off, one of the pilots asked me where he should go so I walked in front of him with five L-5s behind me directing them to the operations officer so that they could come in and then they loaded the patients onto the airplane and off we went.

As the Inchon landings were successful and they forced the North Korean back across the 38th parallel. . .

Well, that was quite a few days afterwards, in September.

September and then you are into October already. How did you. . .

November-December would be the critical time up there. We flew into every airfield just as soon as each was secured. We flew in, even though there wasn't a runway--maybe fields, very rough terrain--and we carried away any patients they had ready for us and off we went. Later on it became snow, ice, slush. We did have the metal runway, what would I call it?

Marston mats I think they were called.

They rolled these metal ramps to make a runway but there was a lot of water and a lot of slush. But despite all of that, at least there was traction for the airplanes. Sometimes the airplanes went off the field.

When things turned bad in the north, and the Chinese came in, and there was the withdrawal from Chosin, what do you remember about all of that?

When there was a battle there were casualties. And they couldn't take care of casualties up there. They could give them first aid if that was possible. Sometimes the patients walked and sometimes they came in on the hood of a jeep. But whenever there was an airfield and whenever there was a battle we went in to pick up the casualties. It didn't matter where.

I understand that you started flying into that little field that they had built at Hagaru-ri.

They wouldn't let the flight nurses in there the first day. They sent our technicians in to look over the area and find out where the planes would come in. The first time I went in, there was a weather factor. Sometimes the pilots lost their way. One time we were lost and came in over a river and between two mountains, but finally got back up to our destination. Hagaru was surrounded on three sides by mountains and it depended upon the weather as to what approach we could make. When we got in there we would unload whatever we had brought in for them--military supplies, gasoline, oil, rations, clothing, shells--whatever the fighting man needed. Air-evac always carried military supplies to the forward areas. Then we offloaded the little straps to make the litter post; we had 24 litter patients. As soon as we got that down we started loading patients and kept on loading. As soon as the plane was loaded we took off. Then there was another plane, right behind us, that landed as we took off. It picked up more patients. Sometimes we went back to where the area MASH hospitals were and, of course, the MASH hospitals did the surgery right there.

And where were they located?

They were just behind the lines. You could still hear the rumble of the guns. And they had holding tents. They did the operations, but, as soon as they did the surgery there was no way for them to stop and take care of these patients. So that's when air evac came in as quickly as we could get there. Then they loaded our airplanes with casualties that had been operated on by MASH hospital staff and we took off. We had no doctor aboard, only a medical technician and a flight nurse. The patients were in critical situations and we had to be very careful. We did not

maintain a high altitude. We had to go as low as we could because the altitude affected the head cases.

The planes weren't pressurized?
No.

Then they were probably cold inside.
They were. Flight nurses carried a blanket bag, a duffel bag about 2 feet across and about 2 ½ feet long. We also had blankets. There were several times when I had a flight suit which was lamb's wool inside and pants. I took those off and put them on top of a patient if he was shivering with the cold. I suppose the colder they got the less they felt their wounds. For the ones that were real bad I took off my flight jacket or took off my flight pants and put those over them, but they were really shivering with cold. There was one trip I remember when the boys walked on in just their white socks. There had been a shortage of quartermaster supplies and these fellows left their shoes behind for the fellows that needed them real badly. So they walked on board my ship with just stocking feet and it was cold.

What kind of aircraft were you flying in there?
Basically, a C-47, which was a DC-3, and a C-54 which was a DC-4, R5-Ds. I flew some of my flights with First Marine Air Wing and then the other ones were Kyushu Gypsies, the Combat Cargo Command.

Do you remember the first flight you took into Hagaru?
The one that I remember was when everybody was scared. We didn't even know whether or not we would be able to get in because of the weather. It was really touch and go and kind of difficult for some of the pilots because it was their first trip in. I know that when we landed we landed very short and they would not let the flight nurses out of the plane. I never got off the airplane. We landed, picked patients up, and then took off as soon as we were loaded.

What kind of conditions did you see? Were there a lot of frost-bitten patients?
Horrible. It was horrible. Some of the boys were in great pain and others were shivering from the cold. Others were very happy knowing that they were going home and getting out of there. Of course, on those air evac flights we carried in all of the supplies. On some of our flights on the C-47 we loaded the whole airplane full of 5-gallon cans of gasoline. They had to leave the little port holes open in the interior of the airplane. If they closed them and there was a spark, naturally the gasoline would explode, and everybody would be lost. There were a lot of incidents where we also carried as many 50-gallon oil drums as we could get on the airplane. Then we landed in an area where they needed these supplies. Naturally, as the plane was unloaded we would take the litter straps down and get ready to take aboard whatever patients they had for us.

I understand that the field at Hagaru was surrounded on three sides by the enemy. The Chinese must have been shooting at you guys.
We heard the gunfire. There was only one approach we could make. If the weather was bad it was kind of a touch and go for pilots.

Did you see bullets flying through the plane?
No, but I heard them. I heard the rumble.

You didn't see any hole in the plane or anything?
No I didn't, no. One plane that crashed had to be moved off the runway so the other planes could land.

Could you see the runway at all?
Well, hardly. Naturally I was in the cabin.

And you weren't allowed out?
No. But I could see whenever the door was open.

What did you see through the door?
Nothing but snow and slush and GIs running around and military equipment being off-loaded and a lot of frantic work being accomplished in order to get the plane off again.

So there was really a high energy level by the time you got on the ground?
Extremely so. Extremely so. Of course, the guys there were very happy to see a woman. It was really kind of a beautiful situation to think that as bad as everything was they would smile and say "It's so wonderful to see an American woman."

Yes. You must of felt pretty important.
It made me feel good. Of course, everybody was awfully good to us. We worked hard too and sometime we didn't pay attention too much, but if a GI smiled at us, especially the guys who wounded and coming aboard. It was a beautiful sight. We reminded them so much of somebody they left behind and they always brought this up. There was movie they made back then called "Flight Nurse" with Joan Leslie and Forrest Tucker. I think the movie itself was kind of ridiculous but it was supposed to be a documentary of what the flight nurses went through. But on the other hand, here's this flight nurse getting off the plane looking for her lover. They're engaged and so forth. I was a technical advisor and that really bothered me. I never watched MASH. MASH is something I deplore. I will not watch it. I don't like all of that fun and laughter because it wasn't the way it was. I know people loved it but I didn't think of it that way. I could never find anything funny about things like that.

You certainly didn't see anything funny in Korea.
No. I have a book called *Combat Cargo Command*. It has a good description of air evacuation. It's not too long and you could copy down any notes.

Sure. Just tell me who the author is.
The author is Captain Annis G. Thompson, United States Air Force, Public Information Officer and Historian of Combat Cargo Command. He was right there. I have about six of my little snapshots that he put in that particular book. Anyhow, I will go ahead with this. It is called "The Greatest Airlift" and it's 801st Medical Air Evacuation Transport Squadron, 315th Air Division, Combat Cargo Command, 314th Troop Carrier Group.

Chinese troops stationed in Manchuria crossed the Yalu River on October 16th and invaded North Korea. On November 1st Red MIG-15 fighters began operating. Stunned American and British troops, overextended and under supplied for a new type of war, fought valiantly to hold back the fresh invaders. They were taken only fourteen miles from the Yalu. American troops, not properly dressed or equipped for extended winter fighting in the cold mountains of Manchuria, were outnumbered twenty to one by the hordes of the Chinese who poured east and south. On November 6th General MacArthur officially stated alien, communist forces from across the Yalu had begun fighting. The Marines, fighting bitterly, were suffering heavy casualties. The cold was taking as heavy a toll as Chinese guns as the inadequately clothed Marines suffered form severe frostbite. The Marines were determined not to leave any wounded behind as they prepared to make one last major effort to break through their encirclement by the Chinese.

After a quick aerial survey, a twenty-three hundred foot airstrip was bulldozed under the frozen rice paddies of the tiny village of Hagaru-ri near the Reservoir. Kyushu Gypsy C-47s, augmented by a few Marine R4-Ds, began landing the same day bringing in additional supplies and airlifting out the wounded. Flight nurses and medics of Combat Cargo Command 801st Squadron flew both Marine and Air Force planes as the wounded were evacuated from Hagaru-ri and Yongpo airstrips. C-47s shuttled the wounded to Yongpo, and the bigger C-54s and C-46s carried them on to hospitals to rear echelon then on to Japan. By December 6th the Kyushu Gypsies had evacuated more than four thousand wounded from the tiny frozen airstrip at Hagaru-ri, almost every plane passing through a hail of enemy ground fire coming and going.

As the Marines planned to fight their way toward Hungnam, another airstrip was bulldozed from the frozen ground at Koto-ri further east. On December 6th the Marines began to battle east towards Koto-ri. With the weather bitterly cold, the Chinese contesting every mile of the way along the winding mountain road. By ten o'clock the next night, suffering many casualties and carrying the wounded and 200 Chinese prisoners with them, the tired Marines had all reached Koto-ri and set up new defensive positions. Late that afternoon, Combat Cargo C-47s began setting down on the new airstrip, shorter and even more inadequate then the strip at Hagaru-ri. By the next night, 700 hundred more wounded and frostbite patients had been evacuated out. They included one of the few quadruple amputees of the war, a frostbite case airlifted out in a Gypsy C-47. His life was saved by air evac and immediate surgery following his arrival in Japan.

The Gypsy C-47s airlifted a record of 4700 wounded out of the two short airstrips in four hectic days. Flying with the Gypsies on the operation was a newly arrived detachment of the Royal Hellenic Air Force, also flying C-47s. They arrived in the midst of the Hagaru-ri operation and began taking part immediately. Later the Gypsies, Greeks, and 801st Medical Air Evacuation Squadron received the Presidential Unit Citation for this Outstanding Air Evacuation operation. They had saved hundreds of Marine's lives by the prompt and safe airlift of the wounded under unbelievably bad conditions.

I think that was quite a remarkable piece of reporting.

It sure was. When you had your first flight into Hagaru-ri, when they opened up the doors and you saw this activity and they started bringing these people aboard, many of them had frostbite and many of them were wounded. What were you able to do for these men?

Right away the most important thing was to get them into position on the airplane. We couldn't do much about treating them until we got the door closed and we started looking around to see who needed help the most. Most of them would have had medic first aid. I know earlier in Korea the corpsmen would put an "MS" on the forehead of the patient to let us know that they had received morphine. If a patient had had a gunshot wound in the thigh, the clothing was torn at that point so that the corpsman could get to the wound. It was bloody, muddy, dirty, smelly, everything. But you just had to ignore that and check the bandages to see if the wound was bleeding. There was not much more we could do than the quick aides and whatever the person needed. At Hagaru-ri there was a lot of snow and slush and some of these boys that came on were wet. The corpsmen would bring up the ramp and then bring the wounded on a stretcher. I would have an extra stretcher handy. I would then have the corpsman put the patient on that clean stretcher. Then we would shake the old stretcher and blankets out from the doorway and then put him back on. Some of them had a lot of dirt under their necks, and some of them didn't have many clothes on either. They just had the blanket on them. But that was something they really appreciated.

You couldn't wash these wounds?

No, but we did have sterile saline solution. If there was a lot of bleeding and we found a lot of dirt in the wound, we would get our sponges and use saline. Sometimes we would just drop that saline pad on top of the wound after I cleansed it. But most of that work had already been down. Many of these boys were going to rear echelons and MASH hospitals to have surgery.

Were these mostly Army or were they mostly Marines?

They were almost all Marines, but there were lots of Army too!

What could you do as far as the frostbite was concern?

Well there was very little we could do except to keep them warm. With frostbite, you'd think there was a lot of pain but that's not the case.

It's numb. Yes.

We just put blankets on.

Were you able to administer intravenous solutions like plasma?

We didn't have blood but we had a great deal of plasma. Those who were coming from the MASH hospitals were already receiving plasma so we would have to hook up the line to the litter straps.

Even on the planes coming down from Hagaru you could administer plasma?

No. At that point we didn't have plasma. It was when we got to a rear echelon out of the MASH hospitals and after they had the surgery.

I see, but not on those flights from Hagaru.

No. The beautiful part of air evac was that when we went over we went over with war supplies unloaded and then came back.

Did you take any replacement personnel on those flights besides supplies?

Yes.

Supplies?

Then earlier before Chosin, like Kimpo, Taegu, Pusan, we would take patients back to Japan, and then from there we would take C-54s and your Navy planes and we would pick up the "R&Rs." These people would be coming back to the front from time off R&R. I have a lot of pictures showing a number of GIs going back to battle, leaving their C-54s and that was kind of interesting but later on that wasn't possible.

When you flew on that first flight to Hagaru what kind of aircraft was it?

C-47.

It was a C-47. And you said that the runway was pretty short and it was pretty rough.

Oh yes, very rough. But as I said, we were so busy. You didn't really look out and worry about where you were. You know, I get lost a lot here in California. Somebody said "Lillian, how come you've gone all over the world and you get lost?" Well, I said I got into an airplane, the pilot and co-pilot flew, and landed me where I was supposed to go and I didn't have to worry about where I was (*laughter*).

You weren't driving.

I wasn't driving (laughter). I sometimes think how funny it is.

When they say that "you have been all over how can you get lost?" When you flew that C-47 out of Hagaru the first time did you go to a base in Korea or Japan?

No, no we just flew back to the first airfield where we could land where they had facilities for medical care or surgery. And then we would leave those patients there and then go back to get more. If that particular airfield where we took the wounded was filled, then we would go to another facility. Then maybe in a day or so, depending upon our schedule, we would go back to one of these airfields and pick up patients and bring them to Japan. The head cases went to one hospital in Japan, the burn cases or amputees would go somewhere else, depending upon the injury.

You don't remember what airfield it was you took them to the first time?

No. We only went by the K-2, K-9, etc.

By the numbers. By the code.

K-47. Once I was 100 miles south of the Manchurian border. We had gone up there to pick up somebody special and then there were a lot of personnel we brought back and some patients. And I don't know what airfield that was. We were never told where we were near. I look at the maps now and I think "Gee, I've been here and I've been there but I don't know where I really was.

How many flights did you make in the course of a day? You wouldn't make more than one flight to Hagaru in a day would you?

Well sometimes we brought our patients to the rear echelon and then if we were within a reasonable distance we could come back and pick up more, but that didn't happen too often.

Wow. What an experience that was.

Let me put it this way. When you got a load of patients it didn't matter who they were or what their wounds, or how things came about. You still had a load of wounded, unhappy, in-pain personnel. And a lot of them were very young. A lot of them got in before they were 18.

So you did the best you could for those people.

You know, they were happy. All of the sudden "Oh, we're going home. We are getting out of here."

Despite their wounds they were still happy.

Yes, very much so. Before Hagaru we landed in different airfields like Wonsan and some of those places and some of those boys might have been in a holding tent or from the time they were wounded. It might have been 4 days and they might not have eaten, they might have had some soup and some coffee. When we were carrying personnel who were returning from R&R, we had box lunches for those boys going back into battle. We would collect all the food that was left in the boxes--the oranges and the sandwiches-- and take it up into the cockpit before the Koreans came aboard to off-load and clean the cabin. So when we got these wounded boys, we had something to give them, at least those who could eat. Some of them had stomach wounds and some of them couldn't even drink water. So we would give them what we could but some of them had been 4 days without eating.

So you didn't have regular food for these people on the plane?

No. We just had to get them out fast. I was 4 days once that I didn't get to bed but I slept with my chin on my chest, and seated on my oxygen tank. That's how I would sleep going back and forth because we could rarely go back to our accommodations to get a good rest and a shower.

Do you remember how many round trips to Hagaru you made?

No, I have no idea. I have 175 for Korea and seven Battle Stars for Korea but I have no idea . Every day was different.

Did you go to Koto-ri also?

Frankly, I don't even know if I was there. I know Haguru-ri but I don't know Koto-ri. I'm not sure because sometimes I had no knowledge as to what the field was. In our flight logs we would put K-whatever and not know whatever area we were in.

Do you remember any particular patients you had on those evac flights?

I had one boy got on a flight who had gotten frostbite and now had black stumps for his fingers.

His fingers were there?

The blackened bones were there. And then, of course, I had one whose face was practically eliminated. Nevertheless, he asked for a pencil and paper and wrote, "Do you think I will live?"

I have that paper in front of me right now. It says, "Do you think I will live? Will I get to go home? When we get to the hospital please tell them to . . ." He overwrote the first words and I can't make them out, something about his left arm, something about his arm. But I have it here because I saved this all of these years.

What could you tell someone like that?

I know it. I have here three paraplegics. I have something here about a "gangrene tongue."

A gangrene tongue?

Yes and a humerus cast, but that is all I have. I can't make it all out.

You saw some pretty horrible things.

They were horrible. I have a picture that I carry with me in my purse because somebody said "What is a flight nurse? What do you do?" All I have to do is take that picture out and it shows the amputees with these great big bulging bandages on their legs. Then there is sort of a chain that attaches and pulls the leg almost forward so it makes him feel that he still has his leg. Then there are others with their hands bandaged. It really is quite a sight to see a plane load of wounded.

Do you still think about those days now?

Well, here it is 50 years later and all of a sudden I am being reminded of everything. You begin to ask yourself if you were really there. For heaven's sakes it doesn't sound as if I have been anywhere. So I don't know. Sometimes I feel that I probably have seen that in a movie. I don't know how I feel anymore because I was working long and hard and I liked it. I really enjoyed putting my whole heart into my work. I thought it was the most wonderful thing to be where I was, flying and taking care of all of these boys. Everything was fast work--fast getting them off, fast getting them off.

Well I can't tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon.

Well I think that's wonderful and I am glad you did this right away because to set a date I wouldn't be sure how things would work out.